

Congressional Testimony of Mr. Bill McKibben
Hearing on Wildlife and Oceans in a Changing Climate
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans
Stepitup07.org
April 17, 2007

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before this committee, and for the chance to share with you some very fresh evidence of Americans' passion for taking strong action on global warming.

I am a writer and environmentalist. My first book, *The End of Nature* in 1989, was also generally acknowledged as the first book for a general audience about global warming. In the years since, I have watched with some dismay as Congress has failed to respond in a serious way to that challenge, and am very glad to see from your interest here today that that situation may be changing.

It is because of that failure that I helped to organize Stepitup07.org. Last summer, in my home state of Vermont, a few of us organized a five-day, 50-mile walk to ask for federal action on climate change. It was a successful venture, drawing a thousand walkers by its finish in Burlington. (In Vermont, a thousand people is a lot). But we were chagrined to read in the newspaper the next day that those thousand people may have represented one of the the largest numbers of Americans yet to gather in one place in this country to protest climate change. That seemed to some of us a situation that needed to change.

On January 10 of this year, we launched a website, stepitup07.org, asking people to organize rallies in their communities on April 14 to demand that Congress pledge to cut carbon emissions 80% by 2050. By 'we' I mean myself and six students who had graduated from Middlebury College, where I teach, in the preceding six months. We had no money and no organization, and so there was no reason other than our own willingness to work hard to think that we would be able to organize a significant number of protests. Our secret hope was that we might convince people in a hundred locations around the country to schedule demonstrations that day.

Instead, three days ago, there were rallies in more than 1,350 communities in every state of the Union. This is not due to our skill as organizers—it is due to the fact that Americans are very eager for real and dramatic action on this issue. For many years it has seemed too large and daunting an issue for most of us to get our hands around, especially since any action in Washington was blocked by committee chairs who refused to take the issue seriously. Even as we performed the necessary individuals steps—screwing in compact fluorescent lightbulbs, say—many of us were left thinking that those steps had a token quality, and that they needed strong federal action to make them real.

The geographic and demographic diversity of these protests was astonishing. From the day we opened our website, we were heartened to see the participation of a wide variety of Americans. One of the founders of the Evangelical Environmental Network, Calvin

DeWitt, wrote one of the first blog posts. One of the first evidences of support from campus came from the Alpha Phi sorority chapter at the University of Texas at Austin, where more than a hundred women posed behind our banner: Step It Up Congress, Cut Carbon 80% by 2050. (“We wanted to show it wasn’t just hippies who cared,” they wrote). League of Women Voters chapters, senior citizens homes, local congregations, bike clubs, garden societies, and many many others participated. And participated with great creativity: in Florida, people organized an underwater demonstration off the endangered coral reefs of the Keys, one of the nation’s most glorious wildlife habitats which cannot survive the anticipated temperature rises of this century. Others in the Sunshine State rallied in the parking lot of the Jacksonville Jaguars demonstration, hoisting a boat via crane 20 feet in the air to show where sea levels might fall should melt of the great ice sheets proceed unabated. In lower Manhattan, people in blue shirts thronged into the streets of lower Manhattan to form a human sea along the line where the tide may someday rise. In Seattle, they hoisted giant salmon puppets to the new tideline, and in the Rockies, Sierras, and Cascades, skiers descended down many of the fast-dwindling glaciers in formation. Everywhere in the country, people used the backdrop of their everyday lives to try and show what some of the effects of climate change would be on their lives. Children and pregnant women were at the front of many marches, symbolizing the stake that our youngest have in the changes that will play out over their lifetimes. Elsewhere, people paid tribute to the many parts of Creation put at risk by our carelessness, from reef fish to maple trees, from those animals that need the snow of winter to those plants who won’t survive a hotter and more arid world. Though this was an entirely citizen-organized day of action, which depended on neither political nor entertainment celebrities to draw its crowds, I am happy to say that many of your colleagues in both chambers and from both parties attended rallies in their local areas. I believe that there were demonstrations in almost all your districts, and you will receive pictures and descriptions of those gatherings at your district offices in the days to come. It was an impressive sight, and one I urge you to see—the largest grassroots environmental gathering since Earth Day 1970, widely covered in the media. Archived photos of all the actions are available at stepitup07.org.

Our hope is that, just as Earth Day 1970 helped usher in bold policy making like the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, this day of action will be one of the catalysts for bold action in this legislative session. Our definition of bold action is cuts of at least 80% in American carbon emissions by 2050. There is no study that says 81% would be too much and 79% too little. Instead, it is a target broadly in line with the message the scientific community has been sending with increasing urgency: we need to begin deep cuts right away and sustain them for many years, transforming the American energy economy in the process, a process that should begin with a moratorium on new coal-fired utilities. That transition will be painful for some interests, but beneficial to many more—a green economy is clearly the economy of the future, and clinging to the bulwarks of last century’s economy simply because they are familiar implies a timidity both unbecoming and un-American. Young people in particular are impatient to see this transition underway. Starting soon is imperative, especially to send a strong signal to those anticipating capital investments in coming years, a signal that it would be folly to continue calculating carbon emissions as a free good with no economic cost. Starting

soon is imperative, as well, because America needs very badly to re-engage in the international negotiations around climate change. Our neglect of our international responsibilities in this regard has been a dangerous failure.

As you know, our record on containing our carbon emissions is poor. Every year since I wrote *The End of Nature* in 1989, carbon emissions have grown about one percent annually. The administration recently predicted that rate would hold at least through 2020. That flies in the face of efforts by every other developed nation, and it flies in the face of science and chemistry. Had we started twenty years ago to make the necessary changes, we could have proceeded gradually. Sadly, your predecessors in Congress neglected to do so, meaning that you will have to take more uncomfortable steps to address the problem. We are confident that changes in both technology and daily habit make the goals of our demonstrations achievable—after all, citizens of western Europe enjoy similar quality of life on half the per capita energy use—but we do not imagine they will be simple. You will be under much pressure from special interests to go slowly, and it's possible that even minimal progress will be cheered in some quarters. But if our rallies, and the many other efforts organized by others in months past and to come, have any meaning, it is this: the bar has been raised. Americans who know and care about this issue—and their number grows daily—want nothing less than action on a scale that actually addresses the problem. The phrase “Step It Up” that we chose for our actions was aimed squarely at you and your colleagues. We hope very much that you are listening.

In closing let me thank the six young people who served as the core organizers of this national effort: Jeremy Osborn, Jon Warnow, Jamie Henn, Phil Aroneanu, May Boeve, and Will Bates are outstanding examples of the reasons we must address this problem, and of the reasons that we can. Thank you for joining them and me in this task.